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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000029

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: UPDATE ON WWII REMAINS RECOVERY IN BURMA

Classified By: CHIEF OF MISSION CARMEN M. MARTINEZ; REASON 1.5 (D)

[11.](#) (SBU) Summary: The recovery of the remains of some 600 WWII missing personnel (mostly crews of aircraft that crashed while flying "the hump" from India to China) is an important USG priority in Burma. With fairly good cooperation from the Government of Burma, the recovery operation is moving ahead more or less on schedule. The limited availability of helicopters this dry season is a major obstacle and has probably reduced significantly the operation's chances of dramatic success in the initial phases. There are many policy and public diplomacy minefields that Post will try to help the operation avoid while working in this sensitive area. End Summary.

[12.](#) (SBU) PROGRESS TO DATE: Following the September 2002 framework agreement reached between visiting DASD Jennings and S1 General Khin Nyunt, three Burmese officials traveled to the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii (CILHI) for a familiarization visit. A well-attended Joint Planning Meeting held in Rangoon in October ironed out many technical details of the operation. The U.S. side included CILHI, DoD's Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), and Embassy Rangoon -- both State and DAO. A health and logistics advance team visited Burma in December to establish medevac and other logistical procedures. The team to scout out potential recovery sites, the Investigative Element (IE), is scheduled to arrive in Rangoon January 12.

[13.](#) (SBU) THE IMPORTANCE OF HELICOPTERS: Most of the probable crash sites are located in Kachin State in the far north of Burma. Dense jungles, high mountains (up to 19,000 ft.), and poor roads make travel by land difficult. Poisonous snakes, bandits, drug traffickers, thousands of armed members of the Kachin Independence Army, and rugged terrain make off-road travel in this area difficult. Helicopter medevac capability would be important for any sustained trek to a crash site by a recovery team. Normally both the scouting team, the IE, and the actual recovery team (the Recovery Element, RE) would use helicopters extensively.

[14.](#) (C) THE LACK OF HELICOPTERS: The Burmese air force has a fleet of Soviet-era helicopters and a small number of helicopters given by the USG to the GOB two decades ago for drug eradication purposes. Given maintenance and repair practices, the reliability of these aircraft is unknown. Further, during the October technical talks the Burmese air force's opening rental price was \$16,000 per blade hour, which they quickly dropped to \$8,000/hr. after the loud, unison guffaw from the U.S. side. This is still two to three times the going commercial rate. Rather than be fleeced to rent helicopters of uncertain reliability, the COM and DATT strongly recommended that commercial helicopters be used to augment GOB helicopters in the recovery efforts. Unfortunately, it appears that the DoD-certified helicopter lease companies in the region are booked up until mid to late February. This means the January IE will be restricted to land transport.

[15.](#) (C) LIMITATIONS OF A LAND-BASED IE: Locating and excavating promising recovery sites is no mean feat. Normally an IE would helicopter to a potential site identified by a combination of aerial reconnaissance and local human information. If the site looked promising to the IE after its helicopter-borne visit, a landing zone would be cut and larger helicopters would ferry in the RE to work the site. If the January IE were restricted to Kachin State's road network, a general impression of the topography of the possible crash site would be about all an IE could glean in the field. The IE also will interview inhabitants who claim to know of crash sites. It seems likely that CILHI will need to conduct further investigations in late February just prior to the beginning of the recovery effort when commercial helicopters are available. This compressed and restricted scouting phase will make it more difficult, but not impossible, to achieve a major recovery success this year.

[16.](#) (C) POLITICS, SENSITIVITIES, AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: Post is keenly aware of the sensitivities of working (on any issue) in Burma. The remains recovery operation in Kachin State is a particularly complex, sensitive, and difficult case.

-- The 1.2 million Kachin have a particular affinity for Americans; over 10,000 fought alongside U.S. troops in WWII

and U.S. Baptist missionaries have converted many Kachin to Christianity. A long-running Kachin separatist movement, spearheaded by the 20,000-strong Kachin Independence Army, has signed a cease-fire with Rangoon's military government but retains its weapons and controls much of Kachin State. As one observer bluntly put it, "Kachins like Americans but distrust (ethnic) Burmese." The investigative and recovery teams will likely pass back and forth between territory controlled by Burmese soldiers and armed KIA members. Interviewing Kachins who claim knowledge of crash sites in front of ethnic Burmese members of Military Intelligence also poses some challenges.

-- While S1 General Khin Nyunt, who heads Burma's military intelligence, is the point man for the GOB on the recovery efforts, it will be the regional military commander in Kachin State (who doesn't report to Khin Nyunt) who controls the military resources on the ground. Just as there appeared to be a different approach on helicopter rental between MI and the Burmese air force, we could possibly see independent action in Kachin State not in keeping with the outline agreed to with MI. However, the DATT held coordination discussions 27 DEC 02 with military commander Maung Aye and S1 Khin Nyunt to help head off any such difficulties.

-- Post personnel are aware of standard procedures routinely employed by MI in Burma. For example, MI apparently attempted to dragoon an English-speaking local to translate for the December logistics visit. A member of the DAO took note, and asked that the man be released from his translating duties, which he was. This same officer saw MI brusquely interrogating a Kachin interlocutor just after his discussion with the American. The officer approached his MI minders and told them to stop harassing the man, which they did. Post, DPMO, and CILHI have discussed in detail with the GOB the serious negative ramifications of any forced labor or forced contributions being used to support this project. The main concern is that some local Burmese commander might not get the word from on high.

17. (C) COMMENT: We are optimistic that the remains recovery effort will be successful. It is important that the Embassy - State and DAO - play an active leading role in the operation to help avoid potential local pitfalls. Perhaps the most promising sites (some of which are extremely remote) can only be investigated and excavated next dry season, after thorough analysis of local knowledge and a helicopter-assisted IE. Nevertheless, the recovery of even a few remains this year is important, both in itself and to establish procedures for an ongoing recovery effort. End Comment.  
Martinez